

Watervliet Shakers South Family
South of Troy Shaker Road (State Route #155),
approximately 1/4 mile east of Sand Creek Road
Albany Vicinity (Colonie)
Albany County
New York

HABS No. NY-3272

HABS
NY,
1-COL,
11-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

WATERVLIET SHAKERS SOUTH FAMILY

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Location: South of Troy Shaker Road (State Route #155), approximately 1/4 mile east of Sand Creek Road, Albany Vicinity (Colonie), Albany County, New York.

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General Information

Although Ann Lee (1736-1784), the foundress of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing (more commonly referred to as the Shakers), arrived in New York City on August 6, 1774 with seven "disciples," it was not until 1787-88 that the first formally organized group was established at New Lebanon, New York. Before this time the center of Shaker activity had been at Niskeyuna, between Albany and Schenectady, New York, and it was from this community - more commonly now referred to as the Watervliet Shaker Community - that Mother Ann travelled through New York State and Massachusetts making converts primarily from artisan and rural farm groups. However, it was not until after her death that the communistic pattern that was uniquely Shaker was established by her followers on the New Lebanon property that eventually (in 1861) was called Mt. Lebanon. Between the time (1787-88) of this formal organization by Joseph Meacham and Lucy Wright and the year 1826, nineteen Shaker colonies in seven states were formed, and the pattern that was established by these followers at New Lebanon was accepted by each of the communities, including the older settlement at Niskeyuna. Though the Watervliet Shakers were no longer to be the "center" of Shaker affairs and administration, they nevertheless always retained a unique prominence because of the association with Mother Ann and because she was buried in 1784 on their communal land.

Eventually "in each Shaker Colony there were separate groups where the members lived as brothers and sisters in the family of Jesus Christ. The 'family' farms were named by the directional relationship of the main dwelling dwelling house to the Meeting House which was on the Church Family property. For example, at Niskeyuna (Watervliet) there were the Church Family, North Family, South Family, and West Family.

"A 'family' composed of fifty to one hundred or more Brethren and Sisters was self-sustaining. Each family was noted for industries that others in the community did not develop to a great extent. The North Family might engage in animal husbandry, leather goods and cloth making; the Church Family in medicinal herb raising and processing, cloth making, chair making and cooperage; the West Family in truck gardening and broom making, and the South Family in fruit and vegetable raising for canning and drying."¹

¹William Lawrence Lassiter, "A Catalog of Shaker Photographs and Measured Drawings" (unpublished catalog of Shaker materials in the History Collection of New York State Education Department, Albany, New York, 1960), pp. 2-3.

Eventually there were four families of Watervliet Shakers that never exceeded 350 members in their total at any one time. From the founding date in 1787-88 until the last member left the property in 1938 the membership included approximately 2,668 adults who had signed the covenant. By 1839 the community prospered to such a degree that it owned 2,500 acres. (In fact, this was not only the period of their greatest material prosperity, but also of their greatest religious fervor and devotion). The South Family itself was "gathered" in 1800, when Building #1 (see photograph - HABS No. 3258) was constructed, and occupied their property until 1938, when their Eldress, Anna Case, died; the three remaining sisters moved to the Mt. Lebanon and Hancock communities.

Edward Deming Andrews observes in his book, The People Called Shakers, that the early structures erected by the Shakers - which were generally of the type to be found in that period in any of the rural areas of New England and New York - were all remodeled or rebuilt by 1805 to conform with a newly emerging "Shaker style." Though one hesitates to use the word "style" in reference to these buildings, since they are not so markedly different from other buildings in the area of that period, there are a number of characteristics that they have in their unrigid uniformity that might justify the term. By 1805 all the one-and-a-half story structures were raised to two and three stories; often the steep gabled and gambrel roofs were replaced by either flat or lower gabled roofs; faced stone (if in an area where quarried stone was easily obtainable) replaced rough stone; plans were more studied and functional, and often exterior doorways were covered with the segmental hoods that in our minds today are one of the "marks" of Shaker architecture. Only the meetinghouses retained the gambrel roof or (even more singular and novel among the orderly, clustered, four-square buildings) had a large bowed roof such as that of the meetinghouse at Mt. Lebanon. This was the most novel building of any Shaker settlement, since this community and this meetinghouse were the nerve center of the widely scattered Shaker sect.

Even the interiors - the colors, the decoration, the furniture and other articles of necessity - were regulated in their design. The Millennial Laws of 1821, revised in 1845, indicate the framework within which Shaker artisans were to work. (See "Appendix," pp. 4 and 5). At first it seems surprising that these rules did not lead to a dull monotony; however, we can see in private and museum collections of Shaker furniture and utensils, and in the rapidly disappearing architecture, that the rigid "rules" allowed these people, who received the exhortation, "Put your hands to work, and your heart to God" from Mother Ann, to reach a perfection that comes only with strong conviction and religious motivation.

The individual communities used materials that were most readily available for the construction of their buildings. At the South Family of Watervliet wood and brick were used, and the buildings were

arranged in a right-angle order that reminds one of a college quadrangle. The South Family - the number and prominence of the buildings indicate - was concerned primarily, as were the majority of the Shakers, with agriculture. And it is with the large number of labor-saving devices (seen perhaps best at Mt. Lebanon and now in museum collections) in connection with the farm buildings and the workshops that Shaker "genius" is evident. Many writers maintain that they were at least fifty years ahead of their time. The laundry dryer (see photograph for the Laundry Building - HABS No. 3243) is a good example.

However, no matter how self-sufficient these people desired to be, they found themselves often in a position that demanded an involvement with the "world." The Main Dwelling of the South Family with the exterior "call bell" at the gable ridge (characteristic of the main dwelling houses at all Shaker communities), was built by "Bruster and Allen, Master Masons" in 1822; however, the Shaker brethren did much of the labor and are responsible for all of the exterior woodwork. In details such as the third floor built-in drawers of pine (now in the New York State Museum's Historical Collection) and in the fitted corner cabinet at the rear of the first floor, can be seen the simplicity, yet fineness, of Shaker craftsmanship. Other photographs from the South Family, such as that of the hand-forged hinge from the barn or the arch kettle in the kitchen of the Main Dwelling, all indicate this pride in and refinement of workmanship.

By the 1920's the number of brothers had decreased to such an extent that a non-Shaker superintendent had to be employed to manage the farm. Architecturally, too, the Shakers could no longer make a stand against the encroachments of the "world." The spirit that motivated the rigid rules of the Millennial Laws was no longer the spirit of the group that could see only a few years before the extinction of their sect. Already in 1875, when the Ministry's Residence at the Church Family at Mt. Lebanon was built, it was evident that the rules were no longer strictly followed. At the South Family of Watervliet this détente is evident in the wing added to the Main Dwelling and in the porch that was added to the Brethren's Workshop as late as c. 1926. Even Eldress Anna Case - the last of the leaders of the South Family - was not able to resist this "relaxation." The photograph of her room in the Main Dwelling shows oriental rugs, wallpaper, framed reproductions and a portrait on the wall, and a bed with carved decoration and fancy bedspread - not overly decorative or comfortable in terms of the "world" perhaps, but in terms of the Millennial Laws, a return to the world.

APPENDIX

Section IX of The Millennial Law as transcribed in Edward Deming Andrews' book, The People Called Shakers, pp. 285-286.

Concerning Building, Painting,
Vernishing and the Manufacture
of Articles for Sale, &c. &c.

1. Beadings, mouldings and cornices, which are merely for fancy may not be made by Believers.
2. Odd or fanciful styles of architecture, may not be used among Believers, neither should any deviate widely from the common styles of building among Believers, without the union of the Ministry.
3. The meeting house should be painted white without, and of a blueish shade within. Houses and shops, should be as near uniform in color, as consistent; but it is advisable to have shops of a little darker shade than dwelling houses.
4. Floors in dwelling houses, if stained at all, should be of a reddish yellow, and shop floors should be of a yellowish red.
5. It is unadvisable for wooden buildings, fronting the street, to be painted red, brown, or black, but they should be of a lightish hue.
6. No buildings may be painted white, save meeting houses.
7. Barns and back buildings, as wood houses, etc. If painted at all, should be of a dark hue, either red, or brown, lead color, or something of the kind, unless they front the road, or command a sightly aspect, and then they should not be of a very light color.
8. It is considered imprudent and is therefore not allowable, to paint or oil such articles as the following, viz. Cart and ox waggon bodies, or any kind of lumber waggon or sleigh boxes, sleds or sleighs, except those kept at the office for journeying; wheelbarrows, and hand cart bodies, or hand sleds for rough use, hoe handles, or fork stales, rake stales, broom or mop handles, for home use, plough beams, milking stools, and all such articles as are exposed to very ready wear, whether for in doors or out.
9. The following articles may be painted, viz. All kinds of cart and waggon wheels and gearing. All kinds of carriages and sleighs for nice use, wheelbarrows, hand carts, and hand sleds, kept exclusively for nice use. Ox yokes and snow shovels, may be stained or oiled. The frames of cart and waggon bodies, also gates may be put together with paint, but not painted.

10. Varnish, if used in dwelling houses, may be applied only to the moveables therein, as the following, viz. Tables, stands, bureaus, cases of drawers, writing desks, or boxes, drawer faces, chests, chairs, etc. etc. Carriages kept exclusively for riding or nice use may be varnished. No ceilings, casings or mouldings, may be varnished. Oval or nice boxes may be stained reddish or yellow, but not varnished. Bannisters or hand rails in dwelling houses may be varnished.

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- (Additional bibliographical listings may be found in Charles C. Adams' article, Edward Deming Andrews' The People Called Shakers, and Marguerite Fellows Melcher's The Shaker Adventure).

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ADDENDUM TO:
SHAKER SOUTH FAMILY, GENERAL VIEWS
Wetervliet Shaker Road, Colonie Township
Wetervliet
Albany County
New York

HABS No. NY-3272

HABS
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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